NCA
VOC FOR PGM/FN
BACKGROUNDER NO. 5-5880 JUNE 1, 1978
WAYNE COREY/RANGOON

BURMA AND MOSLEM REFUGEES

ANNCR:

BURMA AND BANGLADESH WILL BEGIN TALKS EARLY NEXT WEEK ON THE PROBLEMS OF TENS OF THOUSANDS OF MOSLEMS WHO HAVE FLED ACROSS THE BURMESE BORDER INTO BANGLADESH. WITH A BACKGROUND REPORT, HERE IS WAYNE COREY IN RANGOON.

VOICE:

AS THE TALKS NEAR, BURMA IS TRYING TO EXPLAIN AND DEFEND ITS ACTIONS AGAINST THE STEADY CHORUS OF FOREIGN CRITICISM WHICH THE BURMESE GOVERNMENT CONSIDERS UNWARRANTED. RANGOON'S BASIC POSITION IS THAT THE MOSLEMS WHO FLED BURMA'S ARAKAN STATE IN THE NORTHWEST TO BANGLADESH ARE ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS WHO DID NOT WANT TO FACE A CHECK OF THEIR CITIZENSHIP. IT SAYS THERE IS DOCUMENTED EVIDENCE THAT UNSCRUPULOUS ELEMENTS SPREAD RUMORS OF MISTREATMENT OF MOSLEMS HERE IN BURMA BY ARMY TROOPS, WHO IN FACT ARE GENERALLY BELIEVED TO BE WELL-DISCIPLINED.

THE BURMESE GOVERNMENT THIS WEEK WENT TO THE UNUSUAL LENGTH OF TAKING RANGOON-BASED BURMESE AND FOREIGN CORRESPONDENTS ON A TOUR OF THE TROUBLED BORDER AREA. AT THE TOWN OF AKYAB, THE DEPUTY INFORMATION MINISTER COLONEL AUNG HTAY EVEN HELD A NEWS CONFERENCE. HE SAID THE CITIZENSHIP SURVEY WAS CONDUCTED IN OTHER AREAS OF BURMA, NOT JUST ARAKAN STATE. PEOPLE IN BORDER AREAS, HE ADDED, MUST LIVE IN HARMONY. IN REFERENCE TO THE SMUGGLING PROBLEM ALONG THE BURMESE-BANGLADESH BORDER, HE SAID TRADE MUST BE CARRIED OUT IN KEEPING WITH THE LAW.

OTHER BURMESE OFFICIALS CONFIRMED THAT BURMESE ARMY TROOPS HAVE BUILT BUNKERS ALONG THE BORDER. BUT THEY SAID BURMESE TROOPS HAVE NOT FIRED INTO BANGLADESH TERRITORY -- EVEN THOUGH, THEY SAID, SHOTS WERE FIRED FROM THE OTHER SIDE.

DIPLOMATS HERE BELIEVE THE BURMESE GOVERNMENT'S POSITION ON THE MOSLEM REFUGEES IS BASICALLY CREDIBLE. BUT ONE UNANSWERED QUESTION IS WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO THE ADULT MALES WHO DID NOT FLEE WITH THEIR FAMILIES TO BANGLADESH. SOME MOSLEMS INTERVIEWED BY NEWSMEN DURING THE PRESS TOUR SAID THE MEN WERE ARRESTED BY BURMESE ARMY TROOPS AND TAKEN AWAY. PRESUMABLY, THIS WILL BE A KEY TOPIC IN THE FORTHCOMING TALKS HERE IN RANGOON.

-0-

JS/RTD